All The Broken Pieces

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All The Broken Pieces

by blythechild

Summary

On the run and now living in Lithuania, Will questions the longevity of staying with Hannibal as they slip back into old patterns. Then Hannibal proposes an impossible solution to it all...

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Will haggled with his frowning customer, struggling between polite courtesy, his mediocre grasp of Lithuanian, and the knowledge that Hannibal was covertly watching them from across the village square. He couldn't see him, but he knew he was there. He was there more days than not whenever Will went to town to attend to the modest mechanic's business he'd built. The spying implications annoyed Will more than they should have. Hannibal hadn't remained free for so long without being meticulously suspicious and gaining the sort of information that left him four moves ahead of anyone. But Will thought they should've been beyond that by now. He frowned at the frustration and naiveté he felt at his sudden disappointment. The brusque fisherman took it the wrong way and began speaking faster, which lost Will completely.

"Prašau lėčiau," he sighed, and raised his hands in surrender. He didn't have enough patience to play Hannibal's mental chess game *and* deal with an unreasonable local simultaneously. And the unreasonable local was paying him, so… he won.

Twenty minutes later, Will had soothed the fisherman and promised him a working boat motor within a week, and he was blissfully alone again. Just his tools, and the smell of sweat and engine oil, and the soft rush of the Neris as it passed by in the distance. No one bothered him for the rest of the day, which was fine, really. It was a small town with small town quirks, notably, a mistrust of newness. And Will would always seem "new" to them. Hannibal was new as well, and more suited to the sophistication of nearby Vilnius than this suburban town, but he was still *one of them*. Will never would be with his unavoidable foreign-ness and dreadful accent. Increasingly, Will missed the peace of fly fishing in Wolf Trap, or the stormy unpredictability of the Atlantic along southern Georgia, or the cloistering quiet of the German woods. He fantasized about those places, though they were beyond his reach now, and he wondered why. They represented the highlights of his isolation, when he was mentally or physically most at risk. But somehow, he felt more alone here, now, where he was the most visible he'd been in decades, and where he had Hannibal.

He sighed, put away his tools and cleaned up for the day. Hannibal would be expecting him, and Hannibal enjoyed a schedule.

"Can't keep Himself waiting," he muttered, and heard the click-click of nails running up behind him. Will turned and smirked at the scruffy mongrel that sat obediently at his feet and cocked its head to the side in curiosity. "If I delay the presentation of whatever culinary absurdity he's thought up today, there'll be no living with him, right?"

The dog barked helpfully, and Will ruffled his ears, laying out his food before locking him into the garage for the evening. He had shown up a month after Will leased the space, limping, underweight and covered with mange, and Will knew at once that he couldn't take the dog home to Hannibal. So, Ivan lived at the garage, where he was safe from Hannibal's judgmental gaze and earning his keep by protecting the place at night.

"Sleep tight, Ivan," Will murmured as Ivan settled into his dog bed under the work bench with a huff, tail thumping lazily. "See you bright and early."

Will walked through the town and out into the countryside that bordered it. The place they rented was more impressive than the cottage in Germany, but it was still modest by Hannibal's standards. A stone farmhouse on a few acres of land, that once probably barely kept a family alive from season to season. But now it was gentrified with a long driveway, a greenhouse, and lands converted into ornamental gardens and sections for vegetable beds. And it had an "acceptable" kitchen, according to Hannibal.

Will liked to walk no matter the weather. The house wasn't far from town, and it reminded him of who he was: plain, rough, unsuitable for civilizing no matter how hard anyone tried. Like Ivan back in the garage. Will understood that his daydreaming meant he wasn't happy here, though there was little reason for him to be *un* happy either. It was just a furtive feeling circling inside him, impossible to lure into clarity and yet not distant enough to ignore. As Will eventually trudged up the long driveway towards the farmhouse, he suspected that he'd never be truly happy anywhere. It wasn't in his nature.

"Hello," Hannibal smiled when he saw him. That smile used to make Will excitedly nervous, back when they were just getting to know one another. In another life where Hannibal was just an inquisitive doctor and Will was suffering from too many headaches. Will used to think, *How can he seem so delighted? There's nothing here worth smiling about…*

He found Hannibal in the kitchen, with his shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows and an apron tightly cinched around his waist. Will tamped down on the warmth spreading through him as Hannibal stood there, smiling, a meat tenderizer in hand, halted in his work to wholly focus on Will's arrival instead. It just made Will feel more dissatisfied and alone.

This isn't what you think it is. He's never what you imagine him to be.

"How was your day?" Hannibal asked when Will did nothing but stare.

"Oh, I think you know how it was," Will mumbled, and moved to the sink to wash his hands (because Hannibal appreciated that whether it was necessary or not). "I don't know why you're spying on me. I thought we were past that, Hannibal."

Will dried his hands meditatively, and then looked up to find Hannibal watching him, his smile dimmed into something mask-like rather than genuine.

"If you have concerns or… suspicions, why not just come out with it?"

"I suspect you of nothing, Will."

"Well then?" Will shrugged and cocked his hip against the kitchen counter, staring Hannibal down in the way he knew he had to in order to provoke something other than dismissive confection. Hannibal's eyes flicked all over him, but his expression remained impassive. Then he focused on the way Will's arms crossed as he slouched.

"I miss your company. That's all." Hannibal licked his lips and turned back to the meat on the counter.

“I’m barely gone eight hours a day,” Will sighed. “Some days I only go into town to feed the dog.”

“It is enough.”

“Enough for what, Hannibal?”

“Enough for you to build your walls again.” Hannibal said quietly as he put down the tenderizer and massaged the meat like a treasured pet. “You’re constructing another reality, Will. Another world where you feel safe. Away from me, from *this* fugitive reality.”

Hannibal turned abruptly to look at him. “You are feeling alone again, and you are retreating. Isolation is the price you think you owe for safety and clarity, isn’t it?”

Will stood there stunned. He didn’t know why Hannibal’s insights always did that; he should be used to it by now.

“Don’t fall back into that self-violence, Will. Don’t deny who you are in a bargain to live with yourself. Don’t deny who you are to me.”

“That’s a big ask from someone who’s stalking me,” Will smirked back uncomfortably.

“Stalking is a hunter’s term, and I am not hunting you, Will.”

“Really? So, why couldn’t you walk into my garage and tell me what’s on your mind?” Will barked, and then shrugged the hostility away, resettling his glasses to cover it. “You’ve stalked me almost as long as you’ve known me, Hannibal. I’m not the only one who’s falling into old patterns here.”

Silence fell over the kitchen, and Will twitched under its pressure while avoiding Hannibal’s eyes. Eventually, Will heard Hannibal turn and rub his hands on a cloth at his side.

“You’re not happy here.”

“I’m not *unhappy*.”

“Will…”

Will rolled his eyes and sighed. “I was happier in Germany, yes. But you weren’t happy there.”

“I was content – I told you that. I enjoyed the closeness of our lives.”

“But this is more *you*,” Will said flatly, trying not to feel anything in particular. His hand gestured in the direction of the capital. “You can indulge in your need for society and culture, and the luxuries that define you. None of that means anything to me. That’s not who I am, and it makes me uncomfortable.”

“Uncomfortable how?”

“Uncomfortable with you,” Will murmured, staring at a spot on the floor.

“Because you think I’ll find the disparity jarring, and question the viability of our arrangement,” Hannibal concluded quietly. Will didn’t respond, feeling resentful and half-feral in Hannibal’s spotless kitchen. Something raised on blood and hardship that crawled from the woods, tempted by a bowl of milk on the back porch but always wary of the hand who offered it.

“Will,” Hannibal murmured, and then called his name again when Will didn’t respond. “I don’t need those things.”

“Yes, you do,” Will sighed and pushed away from the counter, stalking the tiles like the beast he just imagined he was. “You’re an aristocrat, Hannibal. Deep down, those things are in your bones the way food stamps and second-hand clothes are in mine.”

“You can appreciate beauty, Will. Everyone can.”

“Sure, but I don’t *need* it.”

“Don’t you? The way you described the part of your mind where you fly fish with Abigail is almost transcendent.” Hannibal moved towards him, and Will stopped pacing. “The fever dreams you had about the various cases you worked back in the States, while horrifying, compelled you in a way you’ve only recently come to appreciate. You crave beauty, Will; you crave the rare, exquisite moments that pierce this dark experiment of life. Whether it’s born of blood or sunshine.”

Hannibal paused. “You just don’t think you deserve the craving.”

Will looked up then, preparing to argue and then realizing it was futile. Not with this audience. Hannibal stepped closer, almost directly in front of Will, too close to be friendly. Will could feel the heat of him against his clothes.

“The way you transformed Randall Tier.” Hannibal bent to murmur in Will’s ear. “The way we danced with the Dragon. You understand beauty, Will, and you need it as much as I do. It has nothing to do with our stations in life.”

Will shivered despite his resolve. He’d been on the run with Hannibal for nine months, living like roommates. Before that he’d been separated from Molly by the Dolerhyde case and his private obsession with Hannibal. He hadn’t been intimate with anyone in so long, and this *felt* like intimacy. Like Hannibal had finally decided this thing between them ought to be physical – as if all they’d been waiting for was Hannibal to pick the right moment for it to happen. Intellectually, functionally, aesthetically… Will snapped his eyes open and took two large steps back.

He’s decided this is what he needs to do in order to keep me. This is control, nothing more.

“You’re talking about murder, Hannibal,” Will said woodenly, twitching in a way he wanted to govern but couldn’t. “I’m talking about art openings and nights at the opera and holidays in the south of France. You crave the… status that comes with those things, even if you wear

it disdainfully. You want them because they suit the mask you wear; they are part of your disguise. But I've seen past your disguise, Hannibal. It doesn't fool me anymore, and so the things you crave in order to ensure your survival don't fool me either."

Hannibal's expression became professionally neutral in a flash, the way it used to so often in their sessions together.

"I don't think you really find beauty in those things. I don't think they move you at all – I'm not sure anything really moves you. Not the way I feel when I see Abigail casting on a river in the autumn sun, or the way Hobbes' blood mesmerized me when it dripped off my glasses after I killed him. And when it comes time to choose between the man who sees you as you are, and the baubles that make your person suit more convincing, you'll choose whatever makes your life easier. You have a talent for survival, Hannibal, and I don't think that's changed."

Hannibal just cocked his head slightly, like a confused spaniel. Will sighed.

"That's why I'm retreating to the safety of manual labor and the companionability of strays. To acclimatize myself again. Jumping from one reality to another is a shock to the senses."

Hannibal stared for a long silent minute.

"Such a determined loner, aren't you, Will? Loping away from every outstretched hand, racing deeper into the darkening woods, baying your isolation to the moon as if it's your only nature…"

Will felt his dangerous anger bubbling its way to a slow simmer. He crossed his arms again and lifted his chin as he stood his ground. "Metaphors aside, you don't need me anymore. I've served my purpose. What would it matter at this point if I retreated, or just disappeared one day?"

"Obvious nonsense," Hannibal waved it away casually. "You are as essential as ever."

Will made a sound that bordered on a growl.

"But I see you require convincing," Hannibal said blithely and then moved to wrap up the meat he'd been preparing. "We must hurry though."

"Hurry? Why?" Will felt the conversational rug yanked from under him. This, too, should've been something he'd come to expect by now.

Hannibal turned from the freezer and untied his apron. "The sun, Will. We're racing the sun. Change your clothes. We'll have dinner in the capital tonight."

"The capital? That's almost an hour away."

"Then we're already late." Hannibal made shooing motions with his hands. "Quickly now, Will. Find something that doesn't smell of oil and algae…"

There was no fighting it. Hannibal was immovable when he declared things like that, so Will dutifully changed and sat quietly in the passenger seat, frowning at the sunset and the local scenery whizzing past them. Hannibal let him be until the lights of Vilnius began to fight the glow of the sunset.

“You’ll enjoy this, Will. There’s no need to be quite so martyred,” he sighed.

“Dinner in some impossibly expensive place? You think that’s what I need to improve my mood?” Will mumbled, trying to stow the resentment from his voice. Hannibal didn’t understand him at all. An ironic turn of events considering their history…

“No, I don’t. Dinner is an afterthought. I’m taking you somewhere else first.”

“Somewhere else?”

Will finally turned to face Hannibal as he stared at the road ahead of them, lights flashing across his sharp features in bold diagonal lines. He was wearing a suit – not like the flamboyant plaid ones he favored in Baltimore, but of a similar tailored excess that he couldn’t seem to avoid. It fit him well, as all clothes seemed to, even the off-the-rack specimens he wore in Germany, and Will decided to find that annoying. How dare his clothes respect him so well? Everything Hannibal touched *worked* to his benefit somehow, and it was an experience so alien to Will it liquified him in molten anger and envy simultaneously. It was a minor miracle Will ever caught Hannibal at anything, such was Will’s fundamental disadvantage in their endless competition. Hannibal was the most extreme example of society’s natural selection: monied, educated, unreachable, dispassionate – a perfectly cultured psychopath, or some higher form of that classification yet to be created. He sat in his exquisitely-fitted aubergine suit with his perfectly-knotted hand-woven silk tie perched below that enviably-square jaw driving them to some destination he’d determined would solve their current impasse, and he had no expectation of failure whatsoever. Because things *just worked* for Hannibal Lecter, like it was all a question of the proper application of the correct tool at the most auspicious time.

Will sat next to him in a rumpled sport coat and pants that still held a lingering hint of the river in them, with three days beard growth and smudges on his glasses. He knew whatever reality Hannibal experienced didn’t apply to him, and, by association, Hannibal’s plans which worked so perfectly for him, would never work perfectly for Will in his different, lesser world. Whatever he was planning, wherever they were going, would fail because Hannibal had made a fatal error: he assumed they were the same now. But the fundamental differences between them remained; all Will could do was *feel*, and Hannibal could do everything but that.

“Something’s caught your attention,” Hannibal interrupted Will’s analysis, eyes flicking quickly to him before going back to the road. “What is it?”

“Nothing.” Will huffed and slouched back into the expensive Italian leather seat. “How different we are, maybe. Harmony is so… elusive.”

Hannibal took a moment before answering. “You still believe that. Even after pulling back my skin and living through me.”

“Don’t be dramatic. It isn’t like that. I explained it for you at length.”

Hannibal paused and then spoke quietly. “I gave you everything, but you didn’t want it.”

Will’s head snapped around to Hannibal again. His gut cramped with phantom pain of a blade sliding into him; he could taste Abigail’s blood in his mouth, all warm and sweet. Hannibal’s expression was just as impassive as before, but his voice had been edged with rejection.

“You still don’t want it,” he sighed to the road.

“What did you give me?” Will’s whisper was heated. “Horror. Understanding I can never unlearn, sense memories I can’t erase. What I remember most are the things you took away: my sanity, freedom… my fragile ability to trust another…” Will gulped. “Abigail…”

Hannibal looked away from the road and his eyes were dark, sucking Will in, dragging him down, down, down…

“I regret what I did to Abigail every day.” His voice was low and strangely accented, as if the words were heavier on his tongue. “I… reacted impulsively. I was deeply hurt by you that day…”

“I told you to leave. I warned you,” Will bit back, hands clenching along his thighs. “There was no need for you to ‘react’ at all. You didn’t have to attack Jack or try to kill Alana. All you had to do was *leave.* But you needed to make a statement, and then you turned it into a kabuki horror show of operatic excess. Don’t try gaslighting me into believing it was because of some emotional evisceration I delivered to you. I don’t think you’ve ever been out of control in your life.”

There was a pointed silence as the streetlights flashed by and the drone of the road vibrated through them.

“Because I’m incapable of such feeling,” Hannibal concluded calmly. His fingers flexed quickly on the steering wheel and then settled. “That’s why tonight’s destination is important. You’ll see.”

“See what?” Will asked testily, but Hannibal didn’t say another word until they’d reached Old Town and he’d parked the Aston Martin.

They moved briskly through the medieval streets that were clearing out from the day’s tourist traffic, and Will fell to watching his feet move across the cobblestones. Hannibal strode ahead, chin raised, nodding greetings to those whose eyes met his in the fading light. Eventually, he pulled up outside a small church, its entrance open to the street and lit with the golden glow of candles from within.

“Here?” Will murmured disbelievingly, but Hannibal just gestured for him to step inside.

The church was stone, aged with a patina of candle smoke, history, and an endless parade of believers over the centuries. Its entrance and nave were squat and close, displaying the limits of its original design, but as Will moved deeper towards the transept, it became more

impressive. Clearly additions were made as building techniques evolved, and it boasted a modest series of clerestory windows, a Catherine window over the chancel, and a decorative frieze surrounding the altar. It was the frieze that caught Will's attention. It depicted a line of demons battling a line of angels. Each face was unique, every character fully rendered as if they were a series of meticulous portraits; each one was ferocious, bloodthirsty, battling zealously with no clear hint to the outcome of the war. Angels fell on demons with swords and wrath; demons chewed on angels with relish. It was amoral, nightmarish, and unlike any religious depiction Will had ever seen.

But what he didn't expect was to see the figures *move.*

Will blinked and then stared until his eyes hurt, trying to focus the undulating limbs and shadows to coalesce into something static and recognizable. But the sun had almost set, making the light shift and fracture through the Catherine window, and the only other light source were candles. With the shadows and glow constantly moving, he couldn't make sense of what he was seeing, and the frieze was two storeys above him – too far away to examine more closely. The figures writhed and danced in an almost lurid display of endless struggle. There was a moment of pure fear that shot through Will when he considered he might be hallucinating again.

It can't be. I was cured.

He looked around for an antlered figure in the aisles but saw nothing, not even Hannibal. The worshippers were gone, there wasn't even a priest…

Will turned back to the frieze and still it moved and slithered. He could almost hear the cacophony of screaming, curses, bloody howls as flesh was torn from bone, as blades stabbed; he could smell the sulfur and copper and acrid sweetness of burning bodies… Then the fear was gone from him – just *gone.* Wonder bubbled up in its place. Wonder and compulsion, and an almost feverish desire to *understand it*.

"Remarkable, isn't it?"

Will twitched violently and discovered Hannibal standing close enough to whisper in his ear. Hannibal waited for him to settle, but didn't apologize or explain, just smiling a small, unreadable smile at him.

"It… it moves…"

"A trick of the light." Hannibal's fingers gestured to the sun setting beyond the Catherine window. "But not an accidental one. Someone designed it this way, to use its environment to evoke fear and awe in the congregation. Even by today's standards that's quite a feat."

"But… why?"

Hannibal sighed, seeming almost at home. "A fascination with the macabre walks hand in hand with humanity. On a basic level, we enjoy horror, though individual reactions to it vary. In previous centuries, horror was a facet of daily life, whether experienced or coded into stories, songs, religious practices…" Hannibal waved the statement away as if it were

inconsequential. “It wasn’t avoided as it is today. It was simply a given. A memento mori of the world around us.”

Hannibal watched the dancing frieze with his enigmatic smile.

“My mother brought me here to see this when I was a boy,” he murmured softly, as if she were next to him. As if he *cared* for her. “The effect only happens at certain times of the year when the light is right. And only at dusk, of course. She made sure to bring me at dusk.”

“An odd parenting decision,” Will mumbled, and turned away from the hoard of supernatural creatures to stare at Hannibal’s serene profile in the candlelight. “How old were you?”

“Five, maybe six. It was before Mischa was born.”

Hannibal continued staring at the frieze. He blinked more than usual, and Will wondered if he was trying to solidify the figures into a static image too. But no, why would he? This was exactly the sort of oddity Hannibal adored.

“She wanted me to see it this way, while I was still young enough to be fooled or to believe in magic, I suppose. She wanted to see how I’d react.”

The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, Will thought ruefully. “How did you react?”

“With joy.”

Hannibal turned and grinned, a flush high on his cheeks and still blinking rapidly. It took Will a second to process that Hannibal was trying to stave off tears.

“It’s beautiful,” Hannibal whispered.

Will’s expression turned to wonder. “You weren’t afraid?”

Hannibal shook his head. “She asked, ‘mano sūnus, why is it beautiful?’, and I told her because it was frightening. Because it made me feel. Then she told me she was proud of me and held me close.” Hannibal sighed and looked back to the frieze, which was now dimming as the sun disappeared. “I never loved her more than in that moment. She gave me such a gift that day.”

“Validation,” Will nodded, wondering what that felt like.

“More than that,” Hannibal murmured. “She led me to the realization that beauty and horror are parts of the same thing: just extremes of fascination. And she let me know it was acceptable to enjoy both.”

Will began blinking rapidly as well, and a shock of heat ran through him. “So… this is where you began,” he concluded, watching Hannibal carefully. “This is the memory you most associate with the start of your becoming.”

Hannibal shifted slowly, his stare eventually falling over Will and holding him for a long time in silence.

“I was never like Dolerhyde; I never felt the need to shape who I was to become. I was always *me*, even in my earliest memories.”

“That’s enviable in a way…”

Hannibal nodded, still watching Will intensely. “No place has greater meaning for me than this one. No cathedral, no museum, no great work of art. Here, I revealed the depth of my nature for the first time to someone I loved beyond measure. And that revelation was accepted. My heart was so full that day – I didn’t know one could feel so much. But despite the splendid joy of that moment, I never told anyone else about me with the same expectation of recognition. Not even Mischa. I never *felt* enough for anyone to risk the exposure. Until now.”

Will froze, like a stag an instant before the hunter squeezes the trigger. Just a moment too late to set off and save itself.

“You understand the extremes of fascination, Will. You can look upon them without value judgments. All I’ve ever wanted was to share that with someone. But after four decades, it became a dim desire,” Hannibal murmured and stepped closer, eyes becoming dark pools in the gloom. “Then, I found you. I wasn’t certain I was even looking for you in the first place, but I knew it when we met. Here was someone who could *see*.”

Will swallowed and worked hard to get his voice working. “Y-you didn’t just want me to see, Hannibal. You wanted me to *participate.*”

“That’s true.”

Will’s spine stiffened a little under Hannibal’s unrelenting stare. “I will never kill out of fascination.”

“I know that now,” Hannibal said softly.

“Now?”

“I didn’t realize that in the beginning,” Hannibal shook his head slowly. “I thought I could change you, make you see.”

Will huffed through an ironic smirk. Hannibal just kept watching him as if he’d disappear while he blinked.

“I don’t want that anymore.”

“Don’t you?” Will’s smirk intensified, not allowing the tingling warning along his spine to bleed into his expression. “What do you want now?”

“This.” Hannibal stepped closer. “Communion. Standing in the most sacred place I know, we are talking openly about my very shadowed life. It’s all I’ve ever wanted: to live in the open. Intellectually I understand why I can’t, but the mind only half-rules the body.”

Will felt the incongruity of going slack and tense at the same time. The feral part of him was growling and snapping at the obvious danger, but a softer part was being successfully lured by the bowl of milk.

“You think I’m incapable of feeling. You believe my contrition over Abigail’s death is veiled self-interest.” Hannibal stepped again, and Will could feel him in the air between them, like electricity making his hairs stand up. “You think our connection is about survival, or perhaps homicidal obsession. You have valid reasons for thinking this, Will, but I have never been more honest when I tell you that *you are wrong*.”

Will stood rooted to his spot just inches away from Hannibal. He blinked too fast and then fell into a safer behavior, averting his gaze to an ancient tile on the floor to the left of Hannibal’s immaculate oxford.

“I’m not sure what you expect my reaction to be.”

“I’m not expecting anything but your candidness, Will.”

“I really don’t think you want me to be candid right now.”

“Will,” Hannibal murmured, and then he reached for his arm and held it lightly when he didn’t get an answer. “William, you are such a rare personality that I’ve occasionally amused myself by imagining you as mythological.”

Will glanced up and Hannibal was smiling that perilous, delighted smile of his.

“I’m rare too, but not the sort of rareness that people muse fondly over.” Hannibal’s grip tightened. “Your incandescence pierces my dark rooms, and my affinity for horrible fascination gives you permission to embrace that side of yourself without shame.”

Hannibal bent slightly to catch Will’s eyes. “You will never know shame with me, my half-wild, dangerous friend...”

Validation. shit…

“I killed Abigail out if spite, it’s true. She deserved better, and once the sting of betrayal left me, I knew it was the worst thing I’d ever do. And it cost me you, Will. I’m aware that I’ll never make amends for that.” Hannibal took an uncharacteristic breath to bolster himself. “But if you can see past your anger about Abigail, you may be able to recognize the truth.”

“The truth?”

“That I’m only at my best with you, and you are the same with me.”

fuck…

“The best at what?” Will murmured before he could stop himself, focusing on the brutal curve of Hannibal’s mouth.

“Being who we were always meant to be, free of the constraints set upon us by others.”

Will's blood pounded in his ears making his head hurt in a shadow of the way it did when he was sick. But in this moment, he lacked the confusion his encephalitis gave him. Instead, he felt fully present, vividly, painfully aware of himself and how close he was to losing control over the snapping, hungry ferality within him. This was Hannibal's gift to him.

"Say it," he whispered, letting his eyes slip closed and his inner mongrel off the leash.

There was nothing for an agonizing moment, and then Hannibal's mouth brushed his ear.

"I want you," Hannibal breathed. "Just as you are, Will. I don't want you to become me; you're far more compelling as a counterweight. I want to live in the light and the shadows with you. I want us to debate and battle and exult in the beauty and horror we see around us. I want to share it all with you. I've never felt such a…"

He paused as Will held his breath.

"…pressing hunger for anyone who I didn't want to consume."

Will shivered, knowing he was too close to Hannibal to hide the reaction.

"Is that a promise?" Will's voice broke as he asked it, making his face heat at the tell.

"That I won't eat you?"

"Well… yes. I'm fond of being alive," Will chuckled softly and then calmed himself, breathing in Hannibal's aftershave as he trembled next to him. "But I also mean… can you really tolerate all the ways that I oppose your desires and intentions, Hannibal?"

In that moment, Will understood Hannibal had read him correctly earlier in his kitchen: he was walling himself away from the persistent loneliness that he always felt he deserved. No one really wanted to keep him and believing that Hannibal would felt absurd. Not unless he *felt* something. But Hannibal couldn't feel…

"I'll never kill the way you do, Hannibal," Will choked, experiencing vulnerability in a way that simultaneously enraged him. "I'll never condone that part of you – I'll never participate in it again. I may understand it. I *might* be able to ignore when you indulge it in the future. But it will remain a fundamental conflict between us. I don't think you fully appreciate the consequences of what you're proposing."

Hannibal sighed, and the air breezed along Will's neck raising goosepimples everywhere.

"Will," he murmured eventually. "I have considered every last inch of this proposal for quite some time, and I accept every contradiction, struggle and impossibility that arises from it."

Then Hannibal's fingers curled around Will's chin and turned him into a soft kiss. Will gasped, his eyes flicking open as Hannibal gently slotted against his mouth. There was a flash of terror as his whole body came alive with the urge to run, to tear and claw his way to someplace safer. But it was drowned out by a thirsty roar in his feral core. The cry to be accepted, perhaps adored in a way… anything other than the unfocused burn of discontentment and lonely resignation.

His eyes slipped closed again as he tilted into Hannibal's mouth and captured it in an unmistakable pull. Hannibal made a quiet noise – a gentle vibration of surprise – and Will found himself reacting by opening up, pulling Hannibal in lavishly and slowly, one hand creasing the lines of his impeccable suit jacket. He stepped closer bringing them flush against each other, one of Hannibal's oxfords between Will's scuffed loafers. And they went on that way carelessly and fully, pausing for breath and then sinking back into it as if this weren't the first time. Will felt superheated, burning at his center but clean and quenched at the same time, like some satisfying collision of atomic elements. His ancient mammalian instincts whispered that this would all end with blood, but he flicked his mouth across Hannibal's gleefully, relieved at the sudden snapping of the endless tension between them and hungry from the want it unleashed.

His lips slipped away, tingling and wet as his intellect came back online. His eyes flicked open quickly in the heated darkness their closeness created; Hannibal's expression was hidden in deep shadows from the candlelight, but his breath puffed rapidly against Will's mouth.

"If this is another manipulation, Hannibal, I'll gut you. I promise." The threat barely made any sound at all. Hannibal huffed in a way that suggested a smile.

"I don't doubt that."

"I'm completely serious."

"As am I."

The air between them crackled and strained, and Will knew Hannibal wasn't smiling anymore. It should have been uncomfortable – a warning. But perhaps Will was already too comfortable with apprehension to be scared off by this new dimension connecting them.

"You're going to kill again, aren't you?" Will whispered.

"There is no certainty. Only probability."

Will shook his head slowly, Hannibal's fingers still gripping his chin. "How do you expect me… to give you my vulnerability with that knowledge looming over everything?"

Hannibal paused, his chest rising against Will's hand as he took a huge breath in.

"I expect you to care for me as you care for yourself. As you care for the continued vitality of one of your limbs or your sense of sight. That is how I care for you, Will. You are a fundamental part of my existence. I do not pass judgment on that any more than I would pass judgment on my fallen arches. I cannot do anything about it so I must learn to live with it."

"As simple as that, huh?" Will snarked, leaning in until their noses brushed.

"As simple and as difficult as that, yes."

Hannibal's hands slowly moved to cup either side of Will's face, and his expression seemed close to pained devotion. It momentarily stole Will's breath as his mind tried to find falseness

in it and came up wanting.

“I want to care for you as no one ever has: completely. You don’t have to hide anything from me. Nothing about you is ugly, Will. Nothing about you is wrong.”

“Hannibal, don’t. The flattery is…”

“It isn’t flattery. I cannot change how you see yourself, but I assure you that in the years I’ve spent looking into your mind, that I’ve never found it to be anything less than thoroughly entrancing. And that feeling naturally evolved into attraction.” Hannibal’s fingers skimmed along the lines of Will’s face as if to illustrate his point, then one hand slid up into Will’s hair forcing a gasp from him. “And you have excellent kissing technique. It takes some skill to elevate my pulse, as you might imagine…”

His lips fell on Will’s again, but this time stronger and with greater authority. Will’s hand snaked up to clutch Hannibal’s jaw as he sunk under the sway of him once more, working him with his tongue and teeth that suggested longing and danger in equal amounts. Eventually, Hannibal pulled away with a final, slow suck that left Will leaning after him to chase the feeling.

“I promise you that I feel, Will,” he rasped, his accent flavoring the words a little more. “And I feel so much for you. Complicated, dark, inescapable layers of feeling.”

“I guess we’ll find out,” Will murmured, stumbling over how that confession messed him up deep down inside. Hannibal pulled back a little more to focus his assessment, head tilting slightly in contemplation.

“If you’re not happy here, we can leave. We can go anywhere, Will.”

Will blinked. “We can’t go *anywhere*...”

“Almost anywhere,” Hannibal conceded. “The point is we’re not constrained. I want you to be as happy as you were in Germany, and if that can’t be accomplished here, so be it. We should go wherever you can slip out of your wary skin as often as possible, even if that means we have to move to the center of some uninhabited forest surrounded by a moat that keeps general urbanity at bay.”

His mouth curled into a smirk, and Will found himself smirking in response.

“Don’t promise what you can’t deliver,” Will warned. “I think I’d like a moat.”

“I’d like it too if it made you happy.”

Will was about to object when Hannibal silenced him.

“This is the first time I’ve ever been concerned about fulfillment that doesn’t directly impact my desires, Will.”

“It *does* impact your desires, Hannibal.”

“You know what I mean.”

Will sighed and nodded. “I don’t know if I fully believe you yet. What if I’m… what if this is some passing diversion you’re indulging until it bores you?”

His gaze slid away from Hannibal. He had grown confident in staring him down over the years, but couldn’t find that confidence now, when his worth was being assessed. Will quailed with the knowledge that Hannibal’s opinion of him still meant everything, even in the wake of their litany of betrayals. Hannibal’s hands still held him close – those hands that could cause so much damage or create such beauty – and he let the silence between them stretch to the very limits of their tolerance.

“You’re the mongoose to my snake, Will.”

Will’s eyes snapped back to Hannibal to see a weathered knowing creasing his expression. The memory of that first meal together in Will’s hotel room flared brightly, where Will purposefully insulted him and called him uninteresting. It was so long ago, so much had happened in between that moment and this one. They had done so much to each other since then.

“I knew long ago that I’d be fascinated by you until I died,” Hannibal concluded softly, his fingers circling in Will’s curls. “I can’t break free of you, and I no longer want to. That’s the bottom line.”

Will stared until he thought he saw shadows of the dancing demons and angels in the darkness of Hannibal’s eyes. Undulating, bloody, joyful and horrifying in their mesmerism. He swallowed it all down along with the heat tingling across his body that seemed to pull him closer to a pact that would seal his fate. An increasingly ungovernable part of him wanted to be undulating and bloody with Hannibal and damn the consequences.

“We’re going to kill each other,” he whispered with awe and no small amount of dark anticipation. Hannibal just stared at him like he’d said the filthiest thing ever.

“We’ve already tried that. I think we’re meant to do something far more meaningful. Don’t you?”

“Like what?” Will was trembling again. It felt like it would only be satisfied by opening Hannibal’s chest and climbing inside, curling up in the warmth of his viscera, protected by his ribs as blood seeped into his skin and hair.

“We’re going to elevate one another, Will.” Hannibal bent close and nipped Will’s lips. “We’re going *to thrive.*”

Will sucked his lower lip in and tasted blood, and then he watched as Hannibal’s tongue flicked across his mouth searching for the same thing. And now he was trembling and hard all over, like some marble carving on the verge of crumbling into debris at his feet after years of being untouchable.

“Okay, Hannibal, okay…” he breathed, and then grasped Hannibal’s collar to yank him in for a brutal kiss that left blood in both of their mouths when they hissed apart afterwards.

The sun had set below the window and all that remained was candlelight. The angels and demons were dark and still once more, and there was a flavor to the moment that felt like something cataclysmic and magical had blown in and reordered things before evaporating as quickly as it appeared. Hannibal’s eyes were moving over him in the dark, edges glistening as he recorded every nuisance of Will, waiting…

“Take me back to the farmhouse,” Will said eventually.

“What about dinner?”

“I don’t want to stare at you over some ludicrously overproduced meal and force myself to worry about manners or which fork to use.” He glared meaningfully. If they were going to live honestly, Hannibal needed to begin accepting how much Will loathed civility. “I feel more… fanged and furred than that at the moment.”

Hannibal’s delighted grin seemed brilliantly white in the gloom, and for the first time, Will recognized the hunger in it.

“As you wish,” he murmured, placing a steady hand along Will’s back as he directed them towards the exit to the street.

“I’m certain I can whip up something more to your tastes.”

Will smiled, and they stepped out into the evening crowd, blending in as if they were just like everyone else.

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